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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002388

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#)

SUBJECT: SE TURKEY: SYRIACS CELEBRATES NEW YEAR, BUT
LAMENT VILLAGE PROPERTY DISPUTE

REF: A. 04 ADANA 127

[B](#). 04 ADANA 105

THIS CABLE IS FROM AMCONSUL ADANA.

CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR JOHN W. KUNSTADTER FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Representatives of the Syriac community in Mardin province expressed to poloff satisfaction about a first-ever (for Turkey) Syriac New Year celebration held on April 1. At the same time, they expressed concern about a property dispute brewing in Bardakci village of Mardin, where contacts say 50 Syriac homes have been destroyed, one of two Syriac churches converted to a mosque, and church lands confiscated and put up for sale. The Bardakci case provides an example of the property problems facing religious minority groups, and illustrates the challenges related to achieving returns to the Southeast, even to places where some village infrastructure still exists. End summary.

Celebrations and Returns

[1](#)2. (C) During poloff's visit to a Syriac Christian monastery in Midyat on April 14, the Syriac Bishop there and members of his lay staff expressed satisfaction about the Syriac New Year celebration held in Midyat on April 1. They told us that more than 3000 people from Europe, Iraq and Syria had attended the event, being held for the first time in Turkey. The celebration was reportedly broadcast by a diaspora television station recently established in Sweden and afterwards, according to the Bishop, callers from Iraq phoned the monastery claiming they hadn't even known there were Syriacs in Anatolia. "Participants asked themselves," said the Bishop, "'Am I in Turkey?'" In addition to feeling ecstatic about celebrating the event in Turkey, visitors who had been away for years told our contacts they were heartened by last year's resolution of property disputes in the village of Sarikoy (reftels), and stories of approximately 16 houses being constructed by Syriacs in Elbegendi village, just south of Midyat.

[1](#)3. (C) The Bishop himself did not attend the celebration as he was in Damascus at the time, but he related (to our surprise) that the entire event had been organized in one week's time. Apparently initiated by a member of the Syriac diaspora in Europe - who must have received the "green light" from the government first, according to the Bishop - the event was authorized and attended by the Mardin Governor. (Note: In a March 22 press release, a diaspora group claimed the government "forcefully" changed the name that had been proposed for the event, but the Bishop played down that claim, stating that organizers were able to feature exactly the formulation they preferred - Syriac New Year - on a large banner at the event, if not on the invitation. End note.) The Bishop stated that he had had some concerns about the event going forward so soon after the Mersin flag incident and the ensuing nationalist sentiments, but that his concerns proved to be unfounded.

Property Problems Remain

[1](#)4. (C) This positive development notwithstanding, Syriac contacts are troubled about another property issue brewing in Bardakci village of Mardin province (Note: Bardacki is called "Bote" village by the Syriacs.) Contacts state that more than 85 Syriac Christian families lived in the village in 1978, but that now only six families remain (in Midyat and Istanbul) after the majority fled to Europe in the mid-1980s. Since 2000, approximately 50 Syriac homes in the village have been destroyed, according to the Syriacs, and contacts at the monastery offered us a photograph of the community taken when the houses still existed. (Note: The Syriac diaspora group claims the houses were destroyed by bulldozers "with the order of the state" but post cannot confirm that at this time. End note.)

[1](#)5. (C) Moreover, contacts allege that land associated with one of the community's two churches in the village was confiscated by the government in 2000, by means of local officials who conspired to change property records. Recently the land was reportedly offered for sale -- at a total price of approximately 100,000 Euros, we were told -- by the State

Treasury. (Note: Land registration is incomplete, at best, in this region; the absence of property deeds adds to the difficulty in solving such issues. End note.) Another dispute in the village involves the conversion of one of two Syriac churches into a mosque; monastery lay staff say this was done without consultation with the Syriac Community in Midyat.

Headman Guards the Key to One Church...

15. (C) Despite these issues, representatives of the monastery in Midyat regularly visit the village, with apparently little interference, as they have been renovating the larger of the two churches in the village (the one not converted into a mosque) since 2002, with funds raised by members of the Syriac community in Europe. The current headman of the village safeguards the key to this church for the monastery lay staff members, and appears to have at least a polite relationship with monastery representatives, unlike his predecessor, who used the grounds of the church as a stable until being forced to leave the property by a previous Sub-Governor.

...While Another is used as a mosque

16. (C) Poloff visited the large and impressive church being renovated (said to date back 1,500 years), and had an opportunity to see the other smaller church building, to which an aluminum minaret has been attached. We also saw traces of houses that were allegedly destroyed by bulldozers, though post cannot confirm the circumstances of the houses' destruction. Our contacts told us that in August 2003, both Syriac and Muslim (ethnic Kurdish) members of the community had met to search for an amicable resolution to some of the conflictive issues. Despite some initial agreement on how to move forward, there have been no practical results. More recent visits to the current Sub-Governor of Midyat, contacts said, have also been unproductive to date.

17. (C) Comment: Syriac contacts in Mardin - unlike more confrontational diaspora representatives - are reluctant to give the appearance to the government that they are "complaining too much," despite their apparent skepticism about the government's sincerity on issues relating to religious minorities' rights. They are savvy about using international interest to their advantage, but also work local channels of communication with officials quietly as they seek solutions to their issues, as they did in the case of Sarikoy.

18. (C) Comment, cont'd: It appears that ethnic Kurdish residents of Bardakci, many of whom are likely village guards, as well as local officials, were more than happy to assume the departure of the Syriac Christian families from the village, and indeed, the region, was permanent. The recent notice of sale of the church lands seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back, and put the village's plight more prominently on the agenda of the Syriac community. The government's and State's approach to this dispute will be another important test of Ankara's commitment to supporting displaced persons' return to southeast Turkey and, as important, its commitment to religious tolerance and diversity.

EDELMAN